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This interview was conducted face-to-face at the headquarters of the Workers’ Party in downtown Tunis. It was conducted in two parts: the first, on Wednesday, 11 August 2021; and the second, a follow-up interview, on Monday, 16 August. The interviews combined for a total of approximately three hours, and were conducted primarily in Arabic, with some French and English mixed in. The interview was translated/transcribed. On the night of August 23-24, Head of State Kais Said decided to extend the freeze on parliament “until further notice.” The latter’s activities have been suspended since the “coup

d'état" of July 25. We publish this long interview as an element of information and debate, even if the question of donor willingness to provide funds is not explicitly addressed. – Network. A l'Encontre]

Part 1: Wednesday, 11 August 2021

Monica Marks (MM): How do you see the political situation in Tunisia since President Kais Saied's announcement on 25 July 2021? What are your general thoughts about what led us to this point?

Hamma Hammami (HH): The situation we are experiencing in Tunisia [since July 25] is extremely troubling. It could represent a very dangerous deviation from the democratic path, and from the demands of the revolution as well. Right now, many political leaders, including leaders who—like me—are on the left, are not openly discussing these things. But I believe very firmly that the leader of any political party needs to tell people the truth—not simply to follow what they suppose the “street” wants them to say.

Let us start with the background to 25 July 2021. There were, as you know, very widely felt frustrations that made Tunisians vulnerable to Kais Saied's power grab. To put it simply, Tunisia has been living in a crisis because there haven't been truly deep, revolutionary changes to the system since the 2010–11 revolution.

During the demonstrations of December 2010 and January 2011, Tunisians demanded “Jobs, Freedom, and Dignity!” However, after Zine El-Abdine Ben Ali (r. 1989–2011) fled, the new system did not accomplish what it was created to achieve. We had only changed on the political level, moving from dictatorship to representative democracy. But this did not produce the social changes that people had demanded. The parties in power have primarily looked after their own interests—corrupt interests. Wealth remains in the hands of

the same people that used to be rich under Ben Ali's rule. Many of those corrupt people still hold that wealth, and Tunisian people didn't get anything. Many of those people have been prominent donors to political parties behind the scenes. So of course, the parties are often working to defend the interests [of the wealthy].

Ultimately, ten years on, the government has not solved any of the Tunisian people's basic socio-economic problems. Instead, your average person has even more problems than before. There has been increasing levels of debt and poverty. Over these past ten years, we've also experienced terrorist attacks and a rise in everyday criminality. Besides freedom of expression—which is a massive gain—people cannot point to a single improvement in their actual living conditions.

Big parties have wasted precious time on their own interests, and high-level politicking and deal-making have not solved the people's problems either. Nidaa Tunis and Ennahda decided in 2015 to form a coalition government, but they did not solve any of the major, longer-term problems. They failed to establish a Constitutional Court. They failed to create strong, independent bodies to monitor corruption as well as the quality of media and judicial work. Thus the 2014 [parliamentary and presidential] election didn't solve any issues. The 2019 elections were even worse because instead of solving problems they created a new and even bigger crisis. Those elections were ruled by money, media magnates, and the parallel rise of a new power that these negative forces helped usher in: populism.

The kind of populism that President Kais Saied represents is traditionalist and empty of any serious substantive program. It is conservative regarding the rights of women and the place of religion in society. Politically, it is highly opposed to political parties. In his speech, Saied paints all media and political parties as thoroughly corrupted. "Al-sha'b yurid" [the people want] he says, without telling us exactly what

they want or exactly how he's going to create a program to achieve it. His discourse is sweeping and casts him as a savior figure. Its style is reminiscent of Viktor Orbán in Hungary or Donald Trump in the United States. I read the famous recently published book [How Democracies Die] by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, the US scholars writing about Trump. This phenomenon of a populist leader preaching "the people know what they want" and manipulating this discourse to exclude all others from power perfectly fits what is happening here.

This is exactly what Saied is trying to do. He has no program, no concrete priorities—only sweeping condemnations and ill-defined promises about "cleansing" the country. It is important for people to realize that Saied is extremely rigid in his way of thinking. And he is against democracy. Saied has said that he wants to dissolve all political parties. He harbors a long-standing animosity to parties as a whole, to the concept of parties themselves, and this is well-known in Tunisia. People should read his 12 June 2019 interview in al-Sharyaa al-Maghrabi newspaper. It contains all his ideas, and provides a real foretaste of what was to come.

MM: Many people think Saied is attacking the parties because they are—at least as he claims—entirely corrupted, and that he will solve Tunisia's socio-economic problems by first attacking corruption through breaking what he defines as this corrupt party system.

HH: Yes, many people are presuming that this is the shape of the conflict right now—in other words, that the conflict between Saied and political parties is fundamentally a conflict about corruption. But they are wrong. The war between Saied and political parties is not a war over differing approaches to Tunisia's economic problems. Neither is it a war about corruption. It is, at its core, a war about governing. It is a conflict about power, and who wields authority. Saied wants Tunisia to have a more presidential system, and believes

that he has the popular, street legitimacy now to entitle him to hold all the powers in his own two hands. Parliament and the Kasbah [Prime Ministry] had been practically locked in a power struggle with him since he was elected in 2019, because they had two different visions of whose right it was to hold more power.

But while all this conflict about who holds power has been going on, no parties and no leaders have been taking responsibility for solving Tunisia's deep socio-economic problems. Popular hatred toward Bardo [parliament] and the Kasbah [the government] deepened because people saw them in continuous conflict among each other. They saw circus-like displays of rudeness and even some physical violence in parliament. But they could not easily see the role that Carthage [the presidency] was playing in contributing to the gridlock and political power struggles.

People couldn't easily see, for example, that Saied did not even present one law to parliament over the past two years, despite having the ability and responsibility to do so. They also didn't see [in January 2021] when Saied blocked the ministerial reshuffle of government for a petty, power-oriented reason: he denied giving the final, pro-forma presidential approval to a group of ministers whom the parliament itself had elected and confirmed. The people also didn't notice, in November 2020 and again this spring, when the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT, the largest labor union) proposed a National Dialogue initiative to Saied to help move Tunisia toward a solution for its deep problems and Saied flatly rejected their offer. Furthermore, Saied himself contributed to blocking the creation of a constitutional court by refusing to approve a law that parliament had already passed, which would have helped facilitate the election of that court's members.

Many people similarly didn't see through 18 April 2021, when Saied declared that the Ministry of Interior should be under

his own presidential control. This was a usurpation of the president's role as stated but Tunisia's 2014 constitution. I said publicly on that very day, April 18, that Tunisia is moving toward a coup.

All these political struggles—the political crisis borne of constant fighting between Bardo and the Kasbah, on the one hand, and Carthage [Saied] on the other—deepened Tunisia's economic and social crises and added to the seriousness of Tunisia's public health crisis with Covid-19. They also worsened Tunisia's security, since economic and health crises are also security crises for the country.

MM: What is the importance of Tunisia's national sovereignty at this moment? Is that sovereignty being threatened in any way, in your view?

HH: This is a very important issue. It is vital we recognize that this is not just a conflict internal to Tunisia. This is also an international conflict. We saw this in the immediate run-up to the demonstrations of 25 July 2021, wherein outside interference from interested regional or international actors—not just local Tunisian support—might have played a role in the sequence of events that led to Saied's July 25 announcement.

MM: Can you explain that more clearly?

HH: Yes. Before July 25, I and others in my party sensed there was some level of orchestration or interference involved in how the event was being planned and advertised on Facebook. For example, the key Facebook page that was advertising the event was started by a single person and managed to somehow gain 140,000 participants in one hour. Within twenty-four hours, this page had gained 410,000 participants. Within five days, it had a whopping 700,000 participants. Those are huge numbers in [a small country like] Tunisia, and the speed was so rapid, it had to really make you wonder—if you were

thinking critically in this situation—whether one-hundred percent of the support was truly organic.

My party, the Workers' Party, understood that outside orchestration or amplification might have played a role here. So, we did not go out onto the street to join with the July 25 demonstrators, or with the celebrators after Saied made his announcement. It is strange for us not to be on the street, since my party has a long history of demonstrating especially for conditions connected to social and economic frustrations of the people. But this felt different. We decided it would be wiser to stay away.

Some of the demonstrators on July 25 attacked and burned different Ennahda party headquarters. This also made us uncomfortable, because we do not agree that violence is a solution in this situation. Let me be very clear: my party and I hold Ennahda and all the parties working with it responsible for the political crisis prevailing in the country before July 25. We are not supporting Ennahda in any way.

But Saied is also not an outsider, as I explained earlier. He is not a blameless actor, and he too shares responsibility for creating the political crisis that frustrated people. He has been president of the republic for two years now. So, in our view, he is coming from inside the system. And the actions he announced on July 25—in which he's taking all the powers for himself, essentially naming himself the judge and jury for the whole country, and so on—are not actions taken for the sake of "correcting" Tunisia's revolutionary path. They are actions Saied took for the sake of capturing the system between his own two hands.

MM: Did Kais Saied carry out a coup, in your view?

HH: Yes, he did. Saied had one fraction of the power, and this was in keeping with the system established by Tunisia's 2014 constitution. Now, though, he has all the power. Saied clearly

made a coup against Tunisia's constitution. He is the parliament now. He is the executive now. He is the justice system now, too. He took all three branches of power into his own hands. He is freezing everyone else out, and is keeping all these powers for himself, outside what the constitution or any law actually stipulates. So right now, at this moment, we can say that Tunisia's system of government is autocracy.

MM: Some on the left have called you crazy for saying this. Most people on the left whom I have been meeting with here personally, and whom I have been reading and listening to in the news, seem to strongly support Kais—or at least to feel positive or very hopeful about this moment.

HH: In Tunisia, there is what I call the "Ennahda syndrome." There are elements of the left here that view Ennahda as responsible for every problem, no matter what. It is a kind of obsession. And it can be opportunistic and hypocritical too. There are parties that once ruled with Ennahda, for example, whose leaders and supporters are now claiming to be ardently against Ennahda. As the Workers' Party, we never ruled with Ennahda, not even once, and has been virtually alone in standing clearly and consistently against Ennahda's programs. Why? Because, in our view, Ennahda has a bad economic plan—a conservative, neoliberal economic plan. But what is Saied's economic plan right now? Is it a plan of the left? A plan of the right? Does Saied even have a plan? It's not clear to me why economic leftists would feel excited about his economic plan, because he doesn't have one.

MM: Many of my friends though, especially left-leaning friends and friends who are strongly concerned with the state of corruption in this country, say that Saied is the one president who has given them true hope that he is genuinely committed to combatting corruption in this country. What would you say to those people who see Saied as a genuinely clean and committed anti-corruption fighter?

HH: Saied has not done anything against corruption to this day. [Former Prime Minister] Youssef Chahed exerted ten times the effort Saied has made to fight corruption, even though Chahed's anti-corruption fight was extremely selective and incomplete. Eighteen days have passed since Saied's coup. And what has he done to fight corruption? Nothing. He called the most corrupt businesspeople in the country, represented by Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA, an employers' association representing industrial, trade, and craft sectors), and basically told them, "Don't worry, we won't do anything against you." He told them to lower their prices, which they did because it gave them an easy way out. It was a kind of deal between him and them, in my view. Instead of going after people we know are kingpins of corruption, Saied is going after small potatoes in a manner that looks haphazard and unclear. For example, the first member of parliament (MP) to be arrested was Yassine Ayari, who is a member of no political party and who is, ironically, one of the MPs working the hardest to fight against corruption!

MM: What is UGTT's position in all of this?

HH: [Secretary General Nouredine] Taboubi's position has been very clear. He said that the UGTT will wait for an economic and social plan, and that it will support the interests of workers. He also said, at a speech he delivered in Sfax, that freedoms are a red line that should not be crossed.

MM: Do you think Saied will cross any of those red lines that civil society organizations, including the UGTT, are claiming they will defend regarding rights and freedoms?

HH: Saied represents a major threat to freedom. That is clear. Let me return for a minute, though, to the question regarding support for Saied among the left and civil society groups here in Tunisia. We on the left need to remember, in my view, that our job is not only to be against Ennahda. It is about

presenting a better alternative to Ennahda. Saied is not a better alternative to Ennahda concerning the country's economic and social situation, because he does not have a plan, as I said.

But he also fails to represent a better alternative to Ennahda concerning freedoms and democracy. On the contrary, he represents a worse enemy of freedoms and democracy in Tunisia today since his coup announcement on July 25. He is using the emergency law, which was created back in 1978 when live rounds were used against Tunisians in the Black Thursday protests, where many leftists were brutalized by police forces. Look at what happened to [independent MP] Yassine Ayari [imprisoned on July 29], not because he is linked in any way to any corrupt mafia, but because he simply made a Facebook post. Another MP, Rached al-Khiari, has also been arrested, since July 25, for a Facebook post.

On television now there are almost no critical points of view or analyses being presented. All the MPs and known political figures, including myself, are concerned that they are not allowed to travel outside the country. The media reports that political figures cannot travel, yet the president has said nothing to deny it. We also hear increasing reports of politicians—along with businesspeople, judges, and so on—being denied exit. Many judges are living in terror right now because they, like MPs, have been stripped of immunity since July 25. So, there are multiple groups of people now who are living under the threat of unsubstantiated accusations, arbitrary firings, travel bans, house arrests, or even detention or imprisonment. All of this is taking place outside the scope of due process.

You can see, too, on Facebook and other social media platforms how Saied's supporters are speaking right now. Look at what happened to Samia Abbou [an MP from the Democratic Current, a political party supportive of Saied]. She recently said on Facebook that she is with Saied, but that she does not

necessarily agree with the way he is doing everything. She was mobbed with verbal violence. Look at what happened to Sana Ben Achour [a legal scholar who posted an analysis of why Saied's actions were unconstitutional]. These ways are fascistic, and Saied encourages his supporters to attack others in these verbally violent ways because he himself constantly invokes the need for a "purification" campaign against the political and business elites of this country, which he paints as entirely corrupted. These ways are, again, fascistic and they are dangerous for rights and liberties.

So, what I am saying, to the left and to everyone who will listen, is that we in Tunisia need a better system of democracy than what Ennahda provided—we need to present a better alternative to Ennahda. Saied is not helping us do that.

MM: Speaking of alternatives, I have another question for you. One thing I hear a lot, from many of my friends here and from so many young people I meet on the street, is that Tunisia's political crisis was so terrible before July 25—that the country was trapped in such a desperately unproductive cycle of gridlock and political wrangling—that there simply was no better alternative available to what Saied did. What is your response to that claim?

HH: The Workers' Party had an alternative a year and a half ago. The UGTT had an alternative involving national dialogue that it presented to Saied months and months ago. During the Covid-19 pandemic, we presented Saied with multiple solutions and suggestions. Some of these included suspending debt repayments and also reviewing Tunisia's imports agreements, because there is a huge trade deficit and imbalance in trading. We were focusing our attention mainly on solutions to mitigate people's desperation on the economic and social scene, which is the root of Tunisia's problems in our view as the Workers' Party.

So, we understood, and we absolutely still understand, that Tunisians are angry. They are extremely angry, and rightly so. But the role of political parties is to rationally present alternatives, and to lead a good way forward. It is not to disappear, which is what Saied seems to want.

Right now, we are starting to ask strange new questions in Tunisia like "Can democracy exist without political parties?" and "Can you have a democratic system without a parliament?" because of what Saied is doing and how he is talking. Again, look at how many of Saied's supporters are reacting on social media. They are often making fun of democracy in their posts—they are even speaking about completely eliminating Ennahda and other parties. This is not the way forward. We need many different political parties with many different views. Even if our current parties aren't good enough. We need to make them better.

Simply because your current parties or parliament are bad does not mean you are allowed to eliminate them completely! In a similar way, just because your media and journalists are bad does not give you an excuse to eliminate media altogether.

Many dictators in history started this way. Through popular support, through being democratically elected and then talking about "purifying" the country. Hitler is the worst and most obvious example. But there are others.

I think, for example, about 1987 right here in Tunisia. Ben Ali came to power through his own "medical" coup rather than through elections. So, the conditions were not exactly the same as now of course. But there were some important similarities that we need to be considering very carefully at this moment. I lived through Ben Ali's 1987 coup. The Workers' Party was the only one that stood up at that time and said very clearly that it was a coup. And we were receiving the same criticism that we are receiving now. Many people on the left said, "Hamma is crazy." And then many of those same

people, sadly, found themselves in prison.

We have to study history. And we have to listen to the warning signs right now. There are so many right here, but also many warning signs in the international reactions to what is happening. Youths who were in Egypt [in 2013] are pleading with Tunisians right now, saying please do not make similar mistakes to the ones we made. Please be more awake and aware of what is happening and what can so easily happen in situations where one man takes all the power into his own hands. Hamdeen Sabahi, who once supported [Egyptian President Abdelfattah] al-Sisi, is addressing the Tunisian people saying please do not make a similar mistake.

On the other hand, media in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are speaking about Tunisia as if it's their own, celebrating the alleged fall of the "Ikhwan" [Muslim Brotherhood]. As the Workers' Party, we want Tunisia to be independent. We want Tunisia to be strong and to stand on its own feet. You asked about sovereignty before. It matters here too.

MM: Do you have any final thoughts you would like to share that I did not get the chance to hear or ask about?

HH: One thing I would like to point out, and another reason why I think we need to avoid supposing that Saied will deliver the revolution's goals, or that he'll reliably defend rights and freedoms, is this: Under Ben Ali, Saied never once signed a petition protesting anything Ben Ali ever did. Not a single petition. He has no history as a human rights fighter. As a constitutional law professor, he had no history as someone who ever fought for democracy or took clear positions on any issue that directly contravened Ben Ali's dictatorship. He was never once on the street before the revolution. So why should we see him as a revolutionary now? Or as someone very courageous who will fight the darkest networks of corruption or other abuses inside the Tunisian state?

Right now, we are living in a period of collective hallucination, almost as if people are riding a drug high. They believe in Saied, and they have dreams that he will be able to change so many problems in their lives and in the state itself. If you criticize this moment, or if you criticize Kais as a person in any way, people become very upset. Many people are desperate, and hope of any kind feels so good. But soon, we will come down from that high. He will not deliver those hallucinatory dreams. And I fear that the hangover will be terrible.

Part II: Monday, 16 August 2021

MM: It has been a few days since we last spoke. Have you seen anything new to make you think differently, or do you feel essentially the same about Saied and the situation?

HH: The views I expressed regarding Saied are being increasingly reinforced by recent events. For example, the application of exceptional procedures for entire social categories. For the first time in Tunisia, punishment is being collectively applied across multiple social categories. Lawyers, judges, media figures, MPs, businesspeople, state administrators, and so on are all being lumped into the same broad group and treated as "corrupted ones" without any evidence brought forth through criminal trials in impartial courts of law. They are being forced to stay inside Tunisia and are being collectively banned from traveling. This is not supported by any law, and stands entirely outside any judicial framework.

I'll give you an example. There's an MP from [the pro-Saied] Democratic Current named Anwar Chedli. This MP lives in southern France, in Marseille, with his wife and sons. He was attacked by some MPs from [anti-coup] Karama [Dignity Coalition]. After that, Saied invited him to express his support for him. But when he wanted to travel on Friday [August 13], he was stopped at the airport and waited for a

long time. Then he was informed that he has no right to travel. And when he asked why, they said that they did not have to tell him the reason. This is what we call oppression. They did not even have a reason to give to this MP concerning the reason why he was banned from traveling. And two days prior to that, his colleague from [pro-Saied] Democratic Current, a female MP who is living in Switzerland, was allowed to travel because she has a foreign passport.

When we got clarity concerning why exactly the [border] police stopped Chedli from traveling, the answer was from a Facebook page called Tunsî al-Siyasî (Tunisian Politics). It was a pro-Saied Facebook page, rather than an official source. They had no relationship with the Saied administration or with anyone. But they said they have information that the Interior Ministry has instructions to stop this person. Imagine, an unofficial Facebook page answering the question while there remains no answer from the Interior Ministry itself. This never happened before in Tunisia. Under Habib Bourguiba (r. 1957–87) and Ben Ali, these procedures were done individually, against small groups of individuals, or against Ennahda members. But now we see the introduction of collective punishments concerning entire social categories that Saied deems suspicious. This exposes what I consider to be the real core of Saied's project: oppression.

MM: Are you able to travel right now?

HH: I do not have any official position right now. I am not an MP. But, since I am a political figure, it is possible that I could go to the airport and be stopped there.

MM: Some people have told me it is only the current MPs who are not allowed to travel. But others have told me it is all the MPs since the revolution, from the Constituent Assembly until now.

HH: It is all of them, since the establishment of the

Constituent Assembly. This has not been communicated clearly, but we know it is happening. There is no written decree from Saied dictating this. Rather, it is being done through informal sets of entirely extralegal instructions that are being given to airport security and others. This way of working outside the bounds of the legal system also reminds us of Ben Ali, because he often communicated repressive orders like travel bans through informal instructions.

I would like to talk about a second development since we last spoke, which I consider dangerous: the visit of senior US officials to Tunisia, and what it says about the way Saied communicates (or doesn't) with the Tunisian people. Tunisia's destiny is being discussed outside Tunisia now. The US delegation came to Saied and brought a letter from [US President] Joe Biden conveying what the US government expects Saied to do in the current situation: form a government, fight economic problems, and go back to a more democratic parliamentary path. So, the United States has a clear line of communication with Saied. We also know that he is discussing Tunisia's destiny with [French President] Emmanuel Macron and with foreign ministers from Algeria, Egypt, and the Gulf countries. But what is interesting and very disturbing is this: he has not done anything, it seems, to discuss the destiny of Tunisia with the Tunisian people themselves. He does not have any communications with the various political parties. He is not speaking to the most important NGOs and civil society groups. He is totally shutting himself off from the media, civil society, and other political actors here.

The media cannot report on Saied easily because he does not speak with any of our media, or give them any information concerning his next moves. So, we are waiting for news from foreign embassies concerning our own country. On the rare occasions when Saied does speak to people, it is mostly general words and speechifying. He does not receive journalists or speak with them. There is no one responsible

for his communications and media in the palace at all, as far as I know. So, the media are getting no official information whatsoever. They just wait for Saied's brother, Naoufel, to post something on his personal Facebook page. Or maybe they will wait for a member of one of the groups that are supporting Saied to make a post. Beyond this kind of blackout situation, we also have bloggers who've posted something then get sent to jail, as we discussed when we spoke together a few days ago. This is extremely dangerous for freedom of media.

MM: Many civil society organizations I am speaking with here—ranging from UGTT to Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD) to Tunisian League of Human Rights (LTDH)—are saying that Saied does not seem to want to listen to their ideas for constructing a roadmap forward, and that he has his own roadmap instead.

HH: That is accurate. Saied's preferred modus operandi is to seat people, lecture them, and then dismiss them. He doesn't even put much effort into having performative dialogues, because he doesn't seem to see the value in that.

A third thing I want to emphasize, which I find disturbing since we last spoke, is that August 13, the National Day of Women, and the Personal Status Code. Women were waiting for Saied to speak about women's rights. During Bourguiba and Ben Ali eras they would at least formally make a pretense of thinking about women's rights, claim they are. But Saied made a speech in 2020 saying he's against equality between men and women, especially when it comes to inheritance. He said I'm with the sharia on this point. That contravenes the 2014 Constitution, which states Tunisia is a civil county.

Articles 21 and 46 state that men & women are totally equal in rights—that they have equal rights. This August 13 many feminist organizations like ATFD, which said nothing against July 25, waited for the state to make procedures to amend, advance the Personal Status Code [PSC] to achieve equality.

But Saied avoided speaking about this subject entirely. He just went to a few women in Hayy al-Hillel who do artisanal work and promised to secure their economic and social rights.

I want to highlight two points. The first is that Saied is against equality. Last year he said instead of speaking about equality we should speak about justice, that equality is just a formal matter. It's the same position as that of Ennahda and the Dignity Coalition, and it's dangerous. Because justice means nothing without acknowledging people's equality [and the need for equal treatment] first. Kais Saied expressed a similar position to Ennahda and Karama last year and did nothing to update or redress that this August 13.

We cannot divide civil and political rights from economic & social rights. If a woman doesn't have civil and political rights, she cannot have economic & social rights and vice versa.

MM: I have heard some young people criticize your party for allegedly suggesting that the July 25 protests were motivated by Zionist interference. How do you respond?

HH: This is fake news because in the statement we said that we will not participate in the July 25 movement because we do not know who is behind it and what their goals are. We decided this based on the rapid development of their Facebook group. As I told you, in four or five days they had 700,000 participants. It is unlikely one person could have done this in such a short time. In one hour they had 140,000 participants. We do not know who is behind this movement. It is suspicious. One of the groups that called for it is the Higher Council of Youth, which called for a military system and power in hands of the military and having governors who are members of the military. We did not say that those who participated in the July 25 demonstrations were Zionists. Rather, we said that there are suspicious elements calling for these protests. We said that we do not know exactly who's

organizing this, and whether there's any outside interference in planning and amplifying the calls for these demonstrations on Facebook. That is why we as the Workers' Party didn't participate.

MM: I hear many young people say: "If Saied becomes a dictator, we will simply overthrow him. If he shows any signs of dictatorship, we'll be back on the streets to stop him in his tracks because we overthrew Ben Ali and we understand how to get rid of dictatorship."

HH: These young people might not have lived in the Ben Ali era. Ben Ali was only overthrown after nearly twenty-five years. We do not want Saied to stay for that long. At first, Ben Ali did not show signs of dictatorship. People said, "He's a good person, let's give him time—let's wait and see." But in the meantime, while they were waiting and seeing, he reorganized things so that he could stay in power.

It is very dangerous when you hear some youth speak this way. It shows that they do not see anything really dangerous in this situation and that they're underestimating the value of freedom, democracy, and institutions. It shows they don't truly realize that dictatorship begins little by little. It can start just through speech.

Our role as a political party isn't only to support the people, including our young people, but to warn about the future and what the future might bring.

MM: MPs from most political parties have seemed silent since July 25. They are not warning about the dangers that you say exist. Why? How do you explain that silence, or lack of reaction, on the part of Tunisia's elected politicians, who themselves are being frozen out, placed under a travel ban, and marginalized by Kais Saied right now?

HH: There are corrupted MPs. There are also scared MPs, not all of whom are corrupted. Other MPs and political figures are

probably greedy in this situation and might be opportunistically seeking or expecting positions from Kais Saied.

We in the Workers' Party were against Bourguiba at the height of his power. We were against Ben Ali when he was strong. We were not afraid of being jailed, imprisoned, and tortured. We weren't afraid of telling people the reality at that time, and we won't be scared of or stopped by Saied or any other political party or powerful person now.